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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 004856

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STATE FOR EAP, PM, S/CT, AND EAP/MTS
USPACOM ALSO FOR FPA HUSO AND J5
SECDEF/OSD/ISA/AP (TOOLAN/BAILEY)
JOINT STAFF/J5 (WILKES/ROBINSON/CLEMONS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/30/2016

TAGS: PTER MARR MOPS MCAP RP

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR ADMIRAL FALLON'S VISIT TO THE PHILIPPINES

REF: MANILA 4808

Classified By: (U) Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Fox, I am looking forward to seeing you! General Esperon and I will meet you in Zamboanga and accompany you on your trip to Jolo, where you will have a chance to see for yourself some of the successes in the ongoing Armed Forces of the Philippines operation to eliminate terrorists on the island.

POLITICAL-MILITARY RELATIONS

¶2. (C) President Arroyo, who will become acting Secretary of Defense on December 1 after Secretary Cruz's earlier resignation, remains in a relatively strong political position, with the opposition in its usual state of disarray and with many politicians increasingly focused on Congressional and local elections in May 2007. Renewed efforts by Speaker of the House Jose De Venecia to transform Congress into a "constituent assembly" during the week of December 4 in order to amend the Constitution to provide for a unicameral parliamentary form of government are unlikely to succeed, given the Senate's refusal to go along and an expected Supreme Court challenge. Even if the move succeeded (against most current expectations), President Arroyo would remain in place as chief of state. We are taking no position on the merits of amending the Constitution, since this is an internal decision for the people of the Philippines and their elected representatives to make.

¶3. (C) Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff General Hermogenes Esperon told me he is committed to continuing our counterterrorism cooperation and defense reform, regardless who is the next Secretary of National Defense. He has proven a tough Chief of Staff. Facing down numerous critics, he decided to move ahead with courts-martial for 30 of the 38 officers implicated in last February's aborted coup d'etat. He wants success on Jolo and is driving his commanders hard to capture or kill the Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah leaders there. He has ordered his troops to get the high value targets before Christmas. General Esperon will join us for your trip to Jolo.

JOLO

¶4. (C) You will have a chance to see for yourself on Jolo one of the JI/ASG camps captured by the AFP, a complex capable of sheltering a sizable terrorist force. Lieutenant General Cedo, the Western Mindanao Forces Commander, and Brigadier General Rafael, the Task Force Comet Commander, will be there on the ground to explain the ongoing operation and to show you some of the improvised explosive devices recovered at the camp. Knowing Cedo, I don't expect him to say much with General Esperon there. He is a quiet professional, more comfortable in Tagalog than English, who shows deference to his seniors. Despite these traits, Cedo has proven himself a tenacious fighter and determined leader during the ongoing operation. The AFP has suffered 22 killed and 103 wounded since the August 1 onset of "Operation Ultimatum."

¶5. (C) We have also arranged a small ceremony in Jolo City at which we will reward two boys who provided information on the location of improvised explosive devices. The actions of these children demonstrate how far we have come in our campaign to separate the terrorists from the population on the island of Jolo. We anticipate press coverage of the event.

MARINE CASE

¶6. (SBU) At some point between one and three o'clock in the afternoon of December 4, Makati City Regional Trial Court Judge Pozon will issue his verdict in the case of four U.S. Marines accused of the November 2005 alleged rape of a Filipina. By that time, we should have moved from the rewards ceremony to inspect the former terrorist camp, and, therefore, anticipate no interaction with the press after the verdict is announced.

PUBLIC THEMES:
KEEP UP THE COUNTERTERRORISM FIGHT

¶7. (U) Some themes:

-- In your interactions with General Esperon, Major General Cedo, and other Filipino officers, you may want to express your thanks for their commitment to finishing the fight and appreciation for the sacrifices their troops have already made.

-- At the rewards ceremony, you can note our strong partnership with the Armed Forces of the Philippines and our hope to build together a better future for the people of Jolo and Mindanao.

¶8. (U) If asked:

-- If asked about the Marine case by the press or others, you should stress that it is a principle of Philippine and American law that anyone accused of a crime is presumed innocent until proven guilty. The United States is committed to seeing that justice is served, through a fair and impartial process that can provide for a just outcome. The U.S.-Philippine relationship is long and friendly; the Marine case will not affect that.

-- You should not comment on any possible or announced verdict.

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KENNEY